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This special issue of Educational Action Research is presented in three parts. The first part is a themed issue on the conceptualisation and articulation of impact generated through participatory research. The second part takes the more regular form found in this Journal with a set of five papers with a focus on action research more widely. Finally, we end with a book review of Mark Reed's 'The Research Impact Handbook'.

Part One: The conceptualisation and articulation of impact: hopes, expectations and challenges for the participatory paradigm.

Recent calls by governments, funders and research councils for applied research to progress beyond knowledge collection and production, and to demonstrate the impact it has made, would seem to be a welcome development for participatory researchers. A participatory research approach which is directly embedded in communities and is more action-oriented than research that takes a distanced, objectified approach, should afford great potential for demonstrating impact. As Pat Thomson wryly suggested in her editorial for issue 23 (3) of this journal, 2015, "Action researchers might be forgiven for thinking that, in this context, their moment in the sun had finally arrived" (Thomson 2015).

The call for a more overt demonstration of research impact and evidence of that impact has, however, been tied to certain ways of framing, understanding, and documenting evidence (Penfield et al 2014). Efforts to trace and measure the impacts of research activity have come to be shaped by accountability metrics and an interest in capturing linear relationships in research. As such, the discourse on research impact has been challenging for researchers who strive to decouple the actions and effects of their work from simplistic or reductionist indicators or metrics and determine what a broader range of meaningful indicators of success or effects might look like (Donovan 2011).

For participatory researchers and their partners (community members/practioners/ decision-makers), understandings of impact seldom map neatly onto conventional indicators or simplistic metrics. Research that has participatory practices at its centre is likely to have different types of impact from research that starts from a position of distanced objectivity. The very nature of the work is built on a relational approach to research; emphasising co-production and capacity building during which the process generates impacts in itself (Darby 2017; Pain et al 2011).

The question of how to recognize the nature and form of impact(s) in participatory research has been an emerging area of inquiry in health and social science research, raising questions about approaches to best document understandings of impact (Jagosh et al 2015; Greenhalgh et al 2016a; Greenhalgh et al 2016b).

Understandings of impact made by participatory researchers that take a more comprehensive and inclusive approach for capturing both the intended (and unintended) consequences of research seemed to be struggling to traction. Thomson (2015) suggests that the impact agenda now provides us with an opportunity to argue for a different understanding of change/impact and to place this more securely in the wider arena. This themed issue attempts to address the nature of impact in relation to participatory research, how it arises, what form it takes, and how it is evidenced.

Contributions were invited (methodological, theoretical and examples from practice) from those whose participatory approach to action research has involved them in wrestling with evidencing impact when working within a core set of values that challenge the predominant positivist research paradigm. This call yielded a striking range of issues and discussions surfacing in participatory research broadly, and participatory health research more specifically, as researchers grapple with understanding and documenting impact internationally.

In their article 'Accessing Participatory Research Impact and Legacy', Cook and colleagues report on a project initiated to develop the basis for a prototype interactive

knowledgebase (IK) designed to house papers on participatory research (PR) and connect them to forms of impact engendered by such research processes. The starting point for the work was twofold: firstly, there remains a lack of clear criteria for what might be termed participatory research and what might be research that has strong collaborations but where central agency remains with external researchers; and secondly, this wide and imprecise use of the term 'participatory' leads to difficulties in articulating the connection between PR and the impact which it has, both on the research process and on the focus of that research (expected impact). As the project progressed, however, a number of issues that militate against the public presentation of the impact of participatory research were revealed. These issues include the difficulties of locating journal articles that report on research where 'participatory' is the starting point; the limited reporting of impacts within journal articles; and the way in which authors themselves understand the notion of impact in relation to their work. These concerns are highlighted by Cook and colleagues as issues indicating the under-reporting of the impact of Participatory Research that PR researchers need to address in order for the true impact of their research to be recognised.

Abma and colleagues outline efforts to map out the impact that researchers in Participatory Health Research (PHR) can achieve and situate these within a larger context in their article 'Social Impact of Participatory Health Research: Collaborative Non-Linear Processes of Knowledge Mobilization'. Drawing on case illustrations, they reflect on the Participatory Health Research (PHR) approach, considering forms of social impact and the real-world complications and complexities that can emerge in its pursuit. Abma and colleagues attempt to trace the pathways to impact for this diverse set of projects and capture some of the complexity that exists around community based and participatory projects which have been forged through a longer history of social activism. They argue that Understanding impact for these participatory research projects cannot be confined to the boundaries of a discrete project plan or design, but are intrinsically shaped over time by local histories, sociocultural and political contexts, and long-standing relationships at the community level. This article concludes that social impact is a complex spectrum of effects that can vary by context and community.

In 'PHR in Health and Social Care for Older Adults - Regional Development Through Learning Within and Across Organisations', Rämngård and colleagues approach impact through an exploration of seven PAR projects in community care for older adults in Sweden. Listening circles help to establish processes for reflection within and across each of the different institutional settings. Looking at impact through the lens of organisational learning takes us into an often overlooked angle of participatory research: the relational dynamics that exist between stakeholders which prompts an understanding of impact that is more diffuse in nature than concentrated, narrowly focused outcomes often endorsed in research evaluation frameworks. From this perspective, impact is spread across organisational levels and roles, beyond the discrete goals of the project; recognising PAR as transformational at the practice level, opening up spaces for professional reflection and change that in turn have a knock-on effect for patient-centred care. This idea of a series of impacts that can ripple at various levels, effecting different practices and positions in a distinctive but related way, challenges us to think about PAR initiatives as having greater potential and scope.

The notion of ripple effects surfaces most explicitly in the work by Trickett and colleagues in their article 'Participatory Action Research and Impact: An Ecological Ripples Perspective'. In this article they reflect on the processes of documenting the tangible and intangible aspects of participatory research; elements that can lend a wider perspective of impact on a system or over time. These include perspectives that have been obscured in conventional research, as well as ripple effects that are rarely acknowledged in a formal sense in research, but may give greater sense of its strength over time. Through an exploration of techniques such as social network analysis and ripple effect mapping, they approach PAR from a systems lens, illustrating how documenting the relationships critical to a participatory project is a starting point to understanding the connections that exist, but also the effects that surface over the lifespan of an initiative and beyond its discrete project boundaries.

Banks and colleagues tackle similar challenges in their article 'Pathways to Co-Impact Action Research and Community Organising', raising questions about the nature of co-production, how this concept is used in public discourse and positioning participatory research against it. In doing so, they demonstrate the differences in understandings of impact through case studies and provide an explication of how participation (and co-production) can look differently depending on the design and intent of the work. This speaks to the heart of what participatory research is, a common thread that surfaces across this collection of papers. Using the 'Debt on Teesside' project as an illustration, Banks and colleagues, effectively trace the types of impacts that emerge during the course of the project, and use this case study to provide analytical clarity between participatory impact, collaborative impact and collective impact.

Finally, Springett's article 'Impact in Participatory Health Research: What Can We Learn from Research on Participatory Evaluation?' considers the literature on participatory evaluation and how it relates to notions of impact; how as an iterative approach, it strives to surface the very reflective nature of participatory work and in doing so may hold the key to illuminating impact. Emphasizing both the reflexive and iterative nature of participatory evaluation, Springett brings us to the heart of what makes meaningful participatory research, making it clear that impact can never be singular or linear in this process, but assembled over time, snowballing out of the actions of inquiry. The under-reporting of these dimensions of participatory evaluation, in a move to mimic other forms and tools of evaluation, has minimised dialogue about the unique contributions of a participatory lens. This lessens our appreciation and understanding of impact in participatory research. Recognising this helps to point us forward in discussions of impact and participatory research, reminding us that without active reflective and dialogue we do a disservice to the nature and strength of the work itself.

Across these papers we see common threads emerge regarding notions of impact for participatory research. Questions surface about where participatory research sits in relation to more conventional ideas of impact in research. Through illustrative case studies greater attention is directed to articulating non-traditional, less visible indicators

of success. This leads us to more comprehensive understandings of impact that are more able to reflect the core values for, and nature of, participatory action research, situating the discussion within the values and principles of the approach and recognising the different forms of impact such approaches can foster. In the process, the discussions raised here help to provide clarity on the very nature of participatory work itself as well as the question of impact.

## Part Two

The second part of this issue considers articles discussing action research and action research projects on a variety of topics and from a range of geographical locations (USA, UK, Spain and the Netherlands). Despite their diverse geography and topics common themes can be seen to emerge. For example, the challenge of carrying out action research projects that use forms of critical enquiry within settings that have different expectations of what research might look like (and indeed, what the practice of research might involve); how to address pedagogical change and professional development within a culture of performativity; and how research is perceived and valued outside the academy. The articles illuminate the ongoing tensions created when more democratic approaches to research are undertaken in established infrastructures for knowledge production and framed by paradigms that value the role of the distanced expert, fixed methods for enquiry and the production of predetermined measurable outcomes.

In the editorial that prefaces EARJ Volume 25:3, Rowell suggests a worthwhile question to be asking ourselves is what, if anything, takes place in our action research spaces to “push back against a dominant and monolithic knowledge validations system” (p334.) When taken together, the set of articles published here, as well as reporting on their own local experience, contribute to surfacing challenges action researchers face beyond the undertaking of this relational work itself and offer insights into how even small-scale projects can help us to both hone our critique of the dominant systems of knowledge production and practice which we, as action researchers, may find ourselves working within. The various authors provide insights into ‘what works’ in collaborative action

research situations, articulating some of the quality indicators and impacts of this more democratic form of knowledge production that allows for diverse voices to find the confidence and space to not only be heard, but to have agency in making change happen.

In her article 'A guided walk in the woods: boundary crossing in a collaborative action research project' Gaby Jacobs draws on the experience of a collaborative action research (CAR) project undertaken with school teachers. The immediate focus of the research was how the development of pedagogical sensitivity of teachers and schools in primary education can be promoted to discuss the way in which diverse groups function and indeed how they can function. The process of carrying out this particular project unearthed tensions and dilemmas in relation to the practice of the research, specifically around the construction and place of democracy in the CAR agenda. The key actors in the research, the practitioners and academics, held differing assumptions about the research process, with the practitioners finding the academics' open way of developing the project confusing, seemingly lacking clarity and direction rather than providing a space for democratic engagement. This led to tensions about the nature of *steering* a project rather than an *emergent* approach, a tension that Jacobs discusses in a section on the dilemma of diversity and flexibility versus steering and framing, and the interplay between authority and democracy. Jacobs offers a way of navigating this dilemma through the use of "boundary objects" (defined as objects which live in multiple social worlds and have different identities in each). This approach is offered as a means for bringing together actors in the process to take the work forward whilst retaining diversity. This mechanism allows groups to co-operate without consensus, allowing multiple crossing of boundaries by an array of actors in the project. She concludes that this active crossing of boundaries fosters collaboration. This, she suggests, is a contradiction of previous analyses of collaboration in AR projects based on group relations theory, in which clarity of boundary is viewed as one of the essentials for group functioning.

T. J. Jourian and Z Nicolazzo ('Bringing our communities to the research table: the liberatory potential of collaborative methodological practices alongside LGBTQ participants') also address the notion of boundaries, but use this term somewhat



differently: running up against boundaries rather than boundary crossing. Their work highlights the need for emergent forms of research, such as action research in the context of LGBTQ communities, to push at traditional paradigmatic boundaries. Recognising what they call the 'competing web of accountabilities' they articulate the balancing act they had to play to both encourage participation from within the LGBTQ community and provide a space for voices to be heard. Their article does (as they intend) raise more questions than answers. Many of these questions, about power, hierarchy, and the acceptance, as a valid research dimension, of the concept of struggle to address injustices as opposed to neutral stance, are familiar to action researchers in other contexts. Jourian and Nicolazzo argue, in the context of LGBTQ enquiry, methodologically these concepts remain relatively under-utilized. It is their contention that AR has a much to offer and they see the possibilities to work together with others whose marginalised social identities draw on this relational approach to research to raise their voices and create change.

Luis Villacanas de Castro is also working within a context where the prevailing practice is one of oppression. The project he draws upon ('We are more than EFL teachers – we are educators: emancipating EFL student-teachers through photovoice') highlights pedagogical induced oppression endemic in English Foreign Language (EFL) students in Spain. This oppression, he argues, is largely due to the way in teaching EFL draws on the colonial origins of English language teaching leading to the adoption of a top-down, narrow, scripted curricula based on culturally meaningless, unchallenging and decontextualised classroom practices. Through the use of photovoice, he aimed to produce spaces for three kinds of emancipation: intellectual, educational and pedagogical. Using a critical action research approach to build on participants' own cultural capital opened up spaces for the participating EFL student-teachers to gain confidence in their own cognitive potential and their right to express it in means other than the written form. This embedded the research in a cultural dimension that drew on the knowledge of the student-teachers, valued their thoughts and opinions and opened up spaces that motivated them to learn. In turn, this offered student-teachers ways of thinking, not only for themselves, but as a pedagogical resource that they could, in turn, pass on to their own future students.

Like Villacanas de Castro, Andria Schwartz, Andrea Burrows and Sarah Guffer ('Mentoring partnerships in science education') characterise their project as taking place within a pedagogical approach to teaching which they see as restrictive of the learning of both instructors and students alike. This action research study focused around initiating mentoring partnerships within a physics curriculum that uses a didactic model of education. Here the teacher is held as the source of knowledge and the student a passive recipient. The very nature of this hierarchical relationship means that a partnership approach to mentoring that supports enquiry into teaching and learning through collaborative dialogue presents particular challenges. This honest presentation of the project describes the difficulties not only of overcoming students' reluctance to break through boundaries formed by traditional hierarchical relationships, and to voice their thoughts, ideas and opinions, but also recognises the difficulties experienced by authors/researchers in facilitating this process when their own experience is also born out of more traditional, bounded working practices.

Andrew Lambirth and Ana Cabral report on a small-scale project looking at how teachers manage being classroom practitioners and researchers in a UK context. They too note how the dominant way of thinking and acting led to teachers in their study initially struggling to adopt a reflexive and enquiring approach to their own professional convictions and actions. The article is based on the analysis of the experience of teachers participating in a professional learning and development initiative 'Researching Practice for Improved Learning'. What surfaced was a tension between the purpose of research as perceived by the university researchers (authors) and the managerial pull (in what they term 'the present climate of performativity') for research to become a vehicle to help teachers meet required, externally-devised targets rather than develop a critical approach to pedagogy. These tensions were exacerbated by school administrators, particularly headteachers giving low priority to, the research taking place within the school, which had the effect of positioning the research as a 'bolt on' activity as opposed to a central means for learning, professional development and improvement. "The resultant lack of recognised time afforded to the project contributed to difficulties in changing teachers'

perceptions of research as something that was seen as theoretically complex and the preserve of university academics who used it to write articles, rather than as a participative activity that was innately practical and purposeful for their everyday practice.” The authors do, however, recognise that despite this seemingly unpromising context, the mix of the teachers’ inherent commitment to learning and teaching (to better understand what they were doing and why), together with the external input from academia and the additional inspiration and motivations of the collaborative processes themselves, drew the teachers into a critical research mode that the teacher participants themselves felt had contributed to improving both their teaching and student learning.

Together these papers bring together critical threads in action research; illustrating the stresses and strains of AR in practice with communities; highlighting the lessons learned and foregrounding the ways in which researchers balance the competing interests of their work, the systems and structures within which they operate and the importance of reaching out to other researchers to learn lessons together.

### Part Three

We end this issue with a review by Dr Lisa Gibbs, a member of the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research ([www.icphr.org](http://www.icphr.org)) of Mark Reid’s book ‘The Research Impact Handbook’. Whilst not specifically on the impact of action research/participatory research, given that this issue has had a considerable focus on impact, and Reid’s book certainly considers alternative forms of impact, it seemed appropriate and helpful to include it here as a resource for enquiring action researchers..

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